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Challenges of Strategic Communication

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Successful strategic communication is vital to ensure the success of US policy abroad and at home and to restore global credibility damaged by recent scandals and our inability to compete in a global market for American ideals on a timely and relevant basis. The United States is constantly under the international microscope, and how we deal with issues like North Korea, Iran and the recent outbreak of hostilities between Lebanon and Israel is debated, discussed, supported and vilified in the international community on a daily basis. It is critical that we do not fall into the realm of “Do as I say, not as I do” as we craft our strategic message to the global community. Too often the actions we take speak louder than what we say—most especially when those actions are not consistent with our strategic message.

We need to consider many points of view when dealing with the issue of strategic communication, with generational, ideological, religious, global and regional impacts requiring a consistent and coordinated theme or message. Strategic communication is about shaping choices at many levels to avoid crisis or lessen crisis, defeat propaganda, explain a position (legally, morally or ethically) and shape the future. The message is dynamic, continually requiring assessment and change, and requires an agile and coordinated approach both horizontally and vertically through all levels of government. We can no longer focus on single areas of responsibility—every action or inaction has the potential to be global in nature. The wider

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coordination of strategic communication as a consideration into all aspects of military planning and operations will not only enhance military effectiveness as a tool to advance US strategic interests, but will heighten awareness of both legal and ethical considerations that are vital in allowing the United States to regain, then maintain, the high ground in global perception management. This is where our challenge lies. We must ensure a common understanding of strategic goals/themes/messages with cooperation and message alignment across legislative liaison, interagency coordination, public affairs, fleet operations and information operations, while remaining credible and garnering trust. Key considerations are balancing credibility with ethical, legal and political considerations to create effective strategic communications policy. Slow “official” response damages credibility and undermines what is eventually released. We must plan from the beginning with an effects-based model derived from our strategic goals.

What are our liabilities when employing the news media, public opinion and the Internet as weapons of war? Who coordinates all the information activities under the strategic communication umbrella? How is it synchronized? Should it be through designated personnel in the field or at senior levels in the Pentagon or the State Department where sometimes sensitive policy decisions can be made? At what point does trading speed for “the right answer” hurt our overall strategic communication effort, when our enemies are capable of responding faster and faster? Timeliness has become critical; the hostilities in Lebanon being a prime example. Since the cessation of hostilities, Hezbollah has already made news as they begin to rebuild the damage done by Israeli missiles and provide services and funds to the people of southern Lebanon who are returning to their homes, while the United Nations is still struggling to reach a satisfactory agreement with all parties regarding a UN peacekeeping force.

Coordinating a coherent strategic message is further complicated by new media outlets such as blogs, chat rooms and text messaging, which are becoming preferred sources for information—regardless of validity—in some demographic groups, and make “managing” information release impossible. Yet they also offer new opportunities to influence key audiences and undermine adversaries. How are we to compete in this Infosphere? What is the role of the military and how do we synchronize within the government? The globalization of media and the abbreviated news cycle (anyone with a cell phone can become a potential “reporter”) can transform all levels of military operations into potentially devastating strategic liabilities (e.g., the alleged murder of Iraqi civilians by US marines in Haditha in November 2005). The public will accept some level of moral ambiguity if the stakes are high. However, if there is not a jointly negotiated, practical ethical standard of

conduct, and despite the overall legality of the undertaking, the operation can result in a tactical win but a strategic loss.

In the end, strategic communication, via public affairs, information operations and other capabilities, involves complex legal issues requiring careful review and national level coordination. We must divine the proper roles and responsibilities for all and develop a process which is both timely and meets the needs of all participants in the Department of Defense and the rest of the government. Considering the stakes involved in “fighting the long war”¹ against dispersed, global terrorist networks, the balance between ethical considerations, credibility and gain (e.g., the potential reduction in US casualties, damage to infrastructure, domestic and global economies and deterrence of enemy actions) makes strategic communication a job for all—ambassadors, Foreign Service Officers, Cabinet officials and members of Congress, as well as those of us in the Department of Defense.²

Notes

1. Department of Defense, Quadrennial Defense Review Report 9–18 (Feb 6, 2006), available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/QDR20060203.pdf>.

2. *An Around-the-World Review of Public Diplomacy: Hearing Before the House Committee on International Relations*, 109th Congress 34–42 (2005) (statement of Karen Hughes, Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, US Department of State).